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Manatee County in line for economic boost thanks to Port Manatee

Manatee County scored several major economic developments this month that brighten our future by millions of dollars. New jobs will be created. Taxpayers will save big. Beach lovers will benefit, too.

All this positive news revolves around Port Manatee, which holds the potential to become the county's top economic force in the years to come.

First, county commissioners inched closer to an agreement with Port Dolphin Energy that stands to save taxpayers a bundle on the cost of dredging sand off the northern tip of Anna Maria Island for beach renourishment — and speed up those projects.

Originally, Port Dolphin's proposed \$1 billion pipeline route would have crossed valuable high-quality white sand beds above Anna Maria Island, but the company relented to Manatee County and Longboat Key concerns and pushed the line north. Still, that new route worried government officials. But commissioners endorsed the plan on the condition that sand in the pipeline's path be removed before construction.

Dolphin, a subsidiary of a Norwegian ship-owning company, agreed to that stipulation and also ponied up \$11 million toward Manatee County and Longboat Key beach renourishment projects — a tremendous savings for taxpayers. Beach-goers will appreciate the quicker timeline — indeed, of several years.

Nine days ago, Gov. Charlie Crist put Port Dolphin closer to construction of the submerged deepwater port with his approval of the project, subject to some environmental conditions.

The company plans to unload tankers carrying natural gas at a floating terminal in the gulf some 28 miles west of Anna Maria Island, convert the gas into vapor and then pump the product through the underwater pipeline to Port Manatee and inland four miles, where it would connect with the state's pipeline grid.

The natural gas will boost Florida's energy needs, another plus.

Port Dolphin expects to have a \$150 million economic impact on Manatee County and Port Manatee over the next two decades. Construction is scheduled to run from 2011-2013.

That's a terrific economic jolt. Combined with the possibility that Port Manatee could win \$36 million in federal stimulus money for expansion projects, the port's potential becomes even greater. The grant application will not be decided until February.

Port officials are also aggressively pursuing additional tenants, another jobs plus.

When we last opined on the pipeline issue in June, the question of the sand beds loomed large. Our beaches generate a great deal of revenue from tourism, and we could not afford the loss of renourishment sand.

Port Dolphin, saying then they wanted to be good neighbors, came through again with this new agreement. We applaud the company for working diligently toward a win-win private-public agreement.

The Town of Longboat Key still has outstanding issues, and we await their resolution. We expect Port Dolphin will come through again.

As other sectors of our economy continue to struggle, we look to Port Manatee leading the way to a recovery.

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